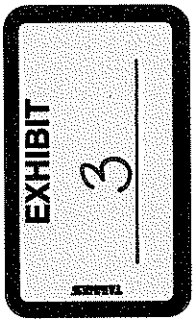
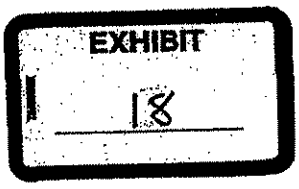
Peterson Farms

Poultry Water Quality Handbook





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Dear Peterson Grower

The protection of our environment and in particular of our region's water quality is of great importance to Peterson Farms. We, as a company, are committed to doing everything we can to insure generations to come have a clean water supply. You, our growers, have made clear your commitment to our environment.

Peterson Farms feels it is important to provide you with the most up-to-date information on water quality; information that will serve as a tool in managing your poultry operation. This book was written by the Poultry Water Quality Consortium for our industry. Using the information in this book will show your commitment and willingness to be stewards of our environment!

Please take the time to review the information in this book. Use it as a resource for making the right choices and following the right management practices in your operation. Peterson Farms will continue to provide you with the most up-to-date information available. Thank you for your time and commitment to this important issue.

Sincerely

Dan Henderson
President of Peterson Farms

Preface to the Second Edition

Air, land, and water — the environment — is more than the place where we live; it is the cornerstone of our quality of life. Every industry, every company, every individual has a stake in the environment.

The poultry industry recognizes the significance of its stake in the environment and the importance of conservation. Protecting the environment from the unintended consequences of production has always been a concern; the phenomenal growth and progress of the industry in recent years have made it a priority. The challenges that come with rapid advancement (e.g., new ways of livestock farming, changing patterns of rural development, water and soil quality) are often too complex to be solved easily or quickly. The challenges are environmental, economic, and social; and they demand cooperation, a free exchange of information, and access to technologies that can help us manage and use poultry by-products as resources, not as wastes requiring disposal.

In pursuit of this goal, the industry and several government agencies created a new venture: the Poultry Water Quality Consortium, to protect natural resources by promoting environmental management. An interagency/industry agreement signed in 1991 and renewed in 1996 formally established the consortium, which includes the following members:

- U.S. Poultry and Egg Association,
- Tennessee Valley Authority,
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the
- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The Poultry Water Quality Consortium is a cooperative effort to identify and adopt environmentally prudent uses of poultry by-products. The first edition of the **Poultry Water Quality Handbook** (1994) helped prove the value of teamwork and the successful outcomes that can be expected from the combined efforts of people and organizations, industry and government. No one is excluded from responsibility, not farmers, service providers, company management, or government officials.

The second edition of the handbook reflects the progress made in environmental management since the early 1990s, especially in the development of markets for manure and litter; the diffusion of composting methods; and the emergence of new technologies for mortality, air quality and nutrient management. Growers should find practical help in these pages — but perhaps also a glimpse of how large the community is that shares their goal. Indeed, with so many research projects and field trials now underway, supported by so many people on farms and in university, government, and industry organizations, the industry is in an excellent position to continue its role as an environmental leader..

The Poultry Water Quality Handbook seeks to consolidate information, ideas, and references to enhance water quality. As the adventure continues, the handbook, which the Consortium will continue to format as fact sheets (to encourage their wide distribution, use, and reuse) — will be revised and updated to include new technology and techniques that will ensure the quality of water for everyone.

U.S. Poultry & Egg Association

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Introducing the Poultry Industry — Its Environmental Issues and Impacts

In the United States, poultry is a major source of agricultural income. In 1996, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Board, the combined value of production from broilers, eggs, turkeys, and sales of chickens contributed $21.8 billion to the economy — an 18 percent increase over the $18.5 billion reported in 1995.

U.S. Leadership and International Influence

In 1996, the United States exported 2.3 million metric tons of poultry meat — nearly four times as much as any other nation and twice as much as Brazil and Hong Kong combined, the next largest exporters of poultry meat products. The United States also leads the world in total egg exports. In 1996, the United States exported nearly five times as many eggs as China, the next largest egg exporter, while China exported nearly twice as many eggs as the next largest egg exporters, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and Turkey.

During the same period, inhabitants of the United States consumed 12.1 million metric tons of poultry meat. China, at 11.3 million metric tons, was the second largest consumer of poultry meat. The per capita consumption of poultry meat in the United States reached nearly 45.6 kilograms or 100.76 pounds per annum in the United States in 1996, with demand in Israel nearly keeping constant, and Hong Kong's consumption increasing slightly. Preliminary figures for 1997 show the United States consumed slightly more poultry meat (per capita) than any other nation, as traditionally recorded.

Thus, the United States produces more poultry, consumes more poultry, and exports more poultry than any other nation in the world.

Simultaneously, however, growing populations and rising per capita incomes are leading to increased poultry production in other nations. In fact, the number of chickens reported on a worldwide basis increased 53 percent between 1980 and 1990 — the increase in Asia alone was over 100 percent. Indeed, the technological expertise that underlies the U.S. poultry industry's phenomenal growth can be easily communicated or "transferred" to developing nations, where poultry is important to support growing, more affluent populations. The industry's growth in these nations can also be expected to continue.

Fueling the Growth

Both genetics and efficiency contribute to the magnitude and value of the U.S. poultry industry. In 1996, for example, broiler production was up 4 percent; egg production, up 2 percent; and the value of turkeys and other chickens also increased. In round numbers, the National Agricultural Statistic Service indicates that U.S. growers raised more than 7.6 billion broilers in 1996; handled 76.1 billion eggs; and marketed 7.17 billion pounds (live weight) of turkey. The number of other chickens (excluding broilers) sold in the United States during 1996 totaled 174 million, a 3-percent decrease from the total sold during 1995 (however, the value of trade in this category increased fractionally despite this decline).

The number of people employed in the industry is difficult to compute, especially if one includes very small operations, and the many off-farm laborers who work in hatcheries, live-bird processing plants, feed mills, and other allied operations serving the industry. Nevertheless, about 70,100 farms reported poultry inventories to the 1992 Census of Agriculture (so that type of farm = poultry); and during the same Census, some 35,000 operations reported poultry-related sales of $1,000 or more under the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) 025 for poultry and eggs. That is,

- 18,284 farms are categorized as "broilers, fryers and roaster chickens" (SIC 0251);
- 10,636, as "chicken eggs" (SIC 0252);
- 3,361, as "turkey and turkey eggs" (SIC 0253);
- 427, as "poultry hatcheries" (SIC 0254); and
- 2,358, as "poultry and eggs, n.e.c." (SIC 0259).

These numbers establish only the minimum threshold for the size of the industry; however, the estimated and combined value of these markets to each state (based on cash receipts collected in 1996) are shown in Figure 1. The income figures are impressive — as they have been for almost 30 years — and they are expected to increase — probably as much as 5 percent each year into the future.

Responsible Waste Management — the Environmental Challenge

Such impressive growth is accompanied by an additional yearly legacy. Every increase in poultry production increases the production of manure, used litter, carcasses, and the flow of wastewater from hatchery, egg, layer, and live-bird processing operations. These by-products must be safely disposed of, or used, to ensure that they do not lead to air or water pollution. The challenge for the industry is where and how to use these poultry wastes to benefit the grower and protect the environment.

The rapid growth of the poultry industry internationally only augments the challenge, as does the clustering of poultry operations near food processing plants or large urban markets. The problem is simple to explain, but not so easily solved.

The traditional use for poultry by-products is land application, but land resources are not always sufficient. Expanded or new uses for poultry waste must be sought: for example, poultry waste can and has been used as an ingredient in organic fertilizers, as a horticultural and mushroom growing medium, and as an ingredient in feed products for livestock, dogs, cats, and aquaculture. Indeed, a continuing search for additional uses is part of the challenge of modern production methods.

The poultry industry is committed to protecting water and air quality, the environment and natural resources. Growers in particular share responsibility with other segments of the agricultural community and all citizens for nonpoint source pollution: the pollution that originates from diffuse sources (e.g., agricultural runoff, urban stormwater runoff, and erosion). Some segments of the poultry industry may also contribute to point source pollution: the pollution that issues from a known or direct discharge (e.g., wastewater discharged from the end of a pipe or discharges from processing or treatment plants).

Understanding the complexity of poultry operations can help us address these potential water quality and environmental issues. The industry is separated into hatchery, breeder, broiler-roaster-Cornish game hens (meat types), and turkey, egg, duck, and other poultry and live-bird processing operations. Each of these operations produces dry or liquid waste and dead birds. Recent developments have shifted environmental awareness beyond live-bird processing plants (offal, feathers, and wastewater) to focus on growers. The shift reflects an increasing awareness of how agricultural runoff affects water quality. It also recognizes that the growth of the industry (and its concentration in certain regions) elevates animal waste management to the status of a major problem.

An Outcome of Modern Production Methods

As any poultry grower knows, the speed, efficiency, and methods used to produce poultry and poultry products have changed drastically during the last 25 years as growers applied

mass production techniques to farming operations and brought the benefits of information technology to the farm. As a result, most poultry are grown in confined operations with limited use of water, except for drinking water for the birds. These conditions and changes require each producer to dispose of or use immense quantities of waste.

Any waste, improperly handled, can pollute the environment. In this respect, poultry operations are no different from other human activities, and though each operation is unique, most if not all of the problems can be prevented or solved through proper waste disposal or utilization methods and changes in management style or production techniques. The solutions are not going to be uniform because each operation is different. Still, each one will begin with a model, a technology, or a case history that others can apply and adapt to their own situations.

It is important for growers to know at the beginning of the production cycle (1) how much waste will result from their operations; (2) how they can measure its chemical and physical make up; and (3) how they can account for its potential impacts on water quality, the environment, and human health. In addition, growers must know (4) how and when such impacts will occur, and (5) what measures they can take to prevent these impacts and manage the waste in an environmentally safe manner.

The overriding environmental issue facing growers today is to prevent poultry waste from adversely affecting water and air quality. Potential water pollutants from on-farm poultry operations can be classified as (1) nutrients and salts, (2) organic materials, (3) bacteria, and (4) viruses. Potential air pollutants are dust and volatile organic compounds [gases], and odor, which is primarily a nuisance.

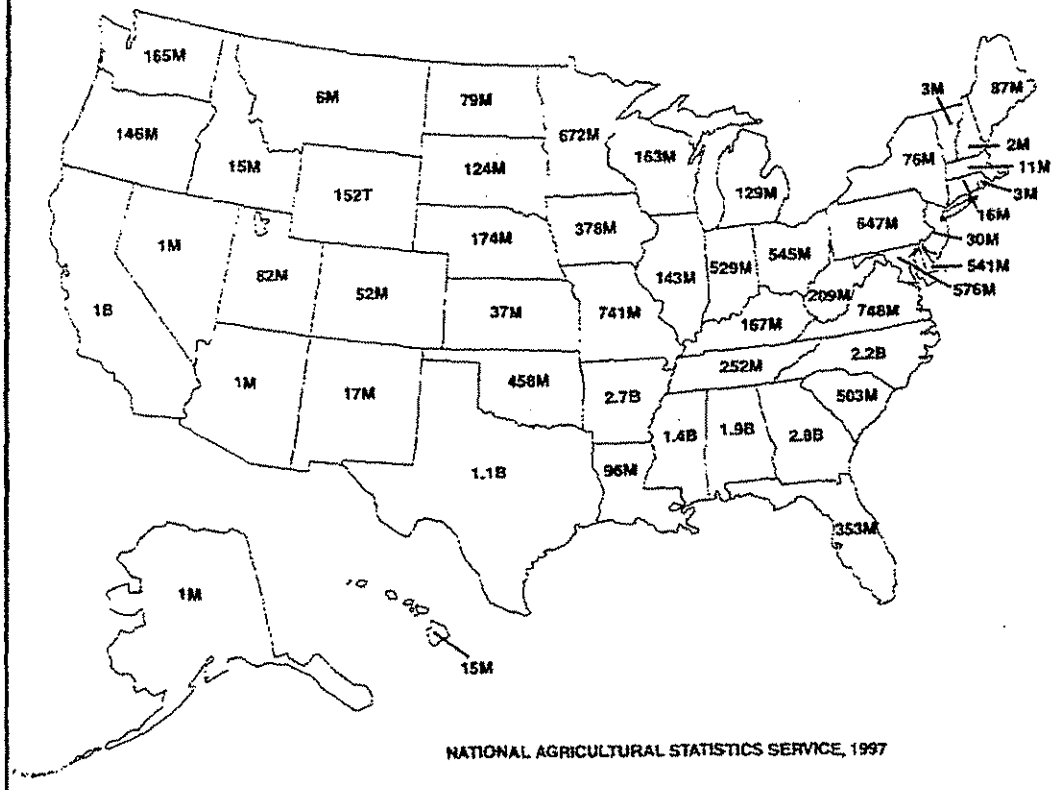

Figure 1.—Poultry cash receipts for 1996 (in dollars).

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These on-farm pollutants may originate in manure, litter, or dead birds. How such wastes are disposed of, treated, or managed will directly influence the cleanliness and safety of surface and groundwater resources. Air quality may also be affected by improperly handled poultry by-products. Air and soil are less obvious but no less important media for transporting these pollutants into the environment.

Disposing of spent hens (breeders or table egg layers after their production cycle) and dead birds is an increasing problem. The daily numbers and volume of dead birds will be predicated on the birds' age and weight, the number of birds in the poultry house, and climatic conditions. Acceptable methods of disposal include (1) burial, (2) incineration, (3) composting, and (4) rendering. Burial pits may have severe environmental limitations in areas of porous or fractured soils that would allow leaching of nutrients to groundwater. Incineration has some limitations, including the possibility of air pollution and increased fuel and labor costs.

Many progressive growers are switching to composting or to rendering as preferred solutions from an environmental and economic viewpoint. A grower must choose a method compatible with his or her individual operation and company preference. Dead birds must be treated as a resource that can add value to a grower's operation. Improper methods of disposal are unacceptable and cannot be condoned.

The magnitude of the problem underscores the advantage to be gained from its alternative: namely, that properly managed poultry wastes from manure, litter, dead birds, and wastewater are profitable farm investments. An effective waste management plan provides for the proper collection, storage, handling, and use of poultry waste. Products derived from wastes will reduce chemical fertilizer costs, improve soil quality, and protect water resources, air quality, and human and animal health. Effective waste management will also promote a favorable public attitude toward the industry.

There is not a single best or optimal approach to protect or preserve water quality and the environment. Good waste management practices are essential if the poultry industry is to continue to grow and thrive under today's environmental and societal challenges. The remainder of this handbook relates to poultry waste management (PWM) and poultry mortality management (PMM), and wastewater concerns. Information sheets on these topics provide management "guidance" to help poultry producers make sound environmental decisions; additional fact sheets discuss other environmental issues (OEI) and alternative technologies (AT). Sources of assistance are profiled in the section on Resource Information (RI).

In general, environmental needs and solutions are site specific and regional in nature. Local sources of information, including industry associations, appropriate state agencies, soil and water conservation districts, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and Cooperative Research Extension, and Education Service offices, should be consulted to ensure that your waste management plan complies with all state and federal regulations.

Producers using this handbook are encouraged to seek assistance from local, state and federal agencies, private consultants, and other professionals on how to implement waste management techniques that protect water quality and the environment. Water quality regulations and permitting requirements vary from state to state and may be more stringent than national regulations.

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WATER QUALITY ISSUES

Other pages in this handbook contain more detailed information on these subjects. Permission is hereby granted to producers, growers, and associations serving the poultry industry to reproduce this material for further distribution. The Poultry Water Quality Consortium is a cooperative effort of industry and government to identify and adopt prudent uses of poultry by-products that will preserve the quality of water for everyone.

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Protecting the Environment and Water Quality

Protecting natural resources is a major goal of the agricultural community in general, and poultry producers in particular, who care about the environment. The quality of our air, soil, and water resources, the welfare of our animals, and human health issues are important to us and to our children; they are our connection to the future. Water quality is the most important environmental concern of the poultry industry.

Environmental protection begins with awareness. We have to know what's at stake when we read or hear about water quality and conservation, or that high concentrations of nitrates or other contaminants have been found in surface and groundwater. We need to understand how the industry's waste management affects water quality. Above all, we must be able to assess the opportunities we have, as private producers and as an industry, to meet these environmental challenges head on.

Poultry growers and the industry must be concerned about the quality of water that comes into and flows from their farms or plants. The industry's first concerns are those that everyone shares: Does the water we use support our needs? Is it drinkable (potable) and palatable? What does it cost to supply water to our homes and businesses? Would additional costs for water treatment ensure its safety for our use?

Where the Water Is

Water covers 70 percent of the earth's surface, but only 3 percent of the earth's water is usable by plants, animals, and humans. Usable water exists either as surface water or groundwater. Surface water is the runoff that flows above ground through rivers, streams, and springs until it eventually drains into the sea or oceans. The land area that collects runoff in defined locations is called a watershed, and no matter how far one lives from the water, everyone lives in a watershed (see Fig. 1).

Groundwater is water that percolates through the soil or enters the earth's subsurface through sinkholes, permeable soils, and fractures in rock formations. The underground water formation is known as an aquifer within which the groundwater moves in various directions. Some aquifers are several hundred feet deep while others lie near the surface of the earth. The upper level of shallow aquifers is called the water table. It rises and falls depending on how dry or wet the season is, or how much groundwater is extracted for use.

Water is a renewable resource; therefore, surface and groundwater are constantly being replenished. But water can also be used up faster than it can be renewed or, in the case of groundwater, "recharged." Groundwater recharge is enhanced by limiting runoff. Human activities that speed runoff or add contaminants to surface and groundwater must be controlled. Land sediments, animal wastes, sewage, pesticides, detergents, oils, and grease are some of the human contributions to poor water quality.

Understanding Water Pollution

Strictly speaking, pure water does not exist. Even rainfall contains gases, dust, and ions acquired from the air. In fact, water (a molecule containing two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom) is a solvent; its ability to dissolve substances is essential to plant and animal life. Most of the substances, elements, or com-

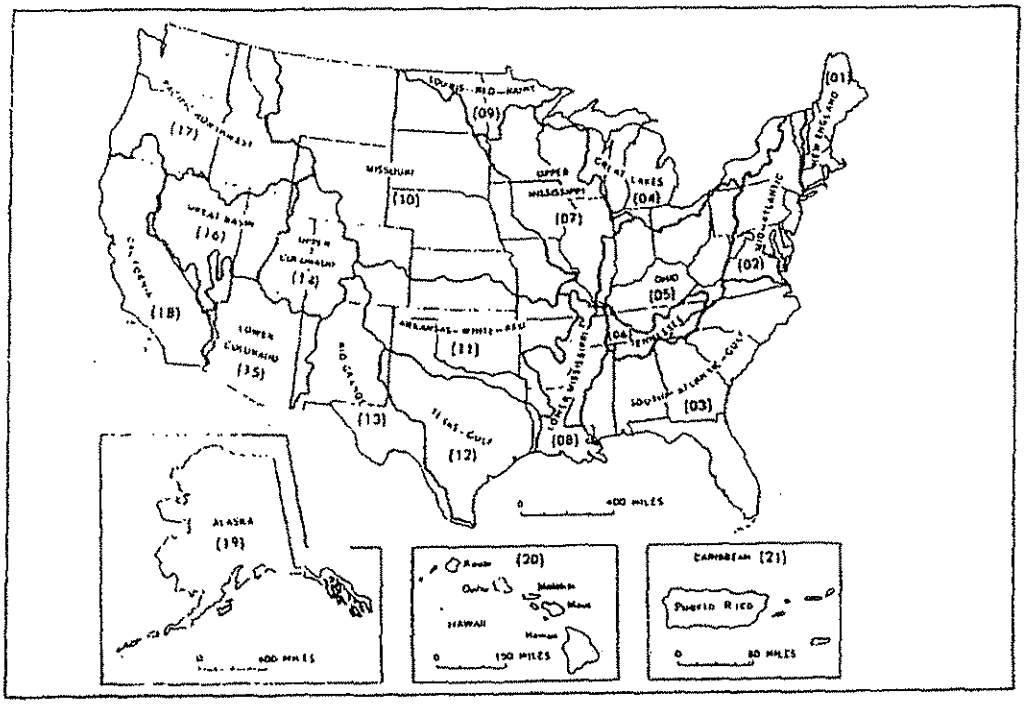

Figure 1.—Water-resources regions of the United States.

pounds that we think of as pollutants are also found naturally in water: nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, calcium, magnesium, sodium, bicarbonate, chloride, sulfate, carbon dioxide, oxygen, and some heavy metals. But when one or more of these substances is found in excessive amounts, the water's use is impaired and the water may be considered polluted.

Potentially polluting substances, sometimes called dissolved substances or solids, can be organic or inorganic, and they occur in natural interaction among the elements of earth and sky. Their effects include color (or lack of clarity), an offensive taste, and odor. They can be added to the water during industrial, agricultural, silvicultural, land development, or other activities that serve human needs and pleasures. In the poultry industry, for example, components of manure, dead birds, and wastewater include nutrients that may be released to water through direct discharge, excessive runoff from the land, or leaching through the soil.

We expect, then, to find some dissolved substances in water; however, water's properties are degraded — its quality impaired — if it contains chemical, biological, physical, or radiological substances in sufficient quantity to restrict its use. Water quality standards defined by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) identify what substances must not appear in water and at what concentrations other substances may be permissible under certain conditions. Tests or analyses that must be performed on drinking water, surface, and groundwater to assess water quality illustrate the complexity of the issue.

This information sheet introduces the topic of water quality. Poultry growers and others should always check with local health agencies or state departments of environmental protection or similar agencies to ensure that they have access to current water quality criteria and standards applicable to their location. Water quality criteria are published in the Federal Register as they are developed.

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What Is Water Quality?

Public domestic water supplies are regularly tested or analyzed for pollutants or contaminants. The results can be obtained from local health departments or appropriate state agencies. Private water supplies or wells should also be analyzed.

The most common tests for water quality analyze (1) pH (the level of hydrogen ions in the water), (2) total alkalinity, (3) total hardness, (4) salts, (5) chlorine, (6) dissolved oxygen, (7) metals, and (8) pathogens. Sometimes water needs to be tested for heavy metals, such as copper, lead, mercury, or zinc; or for toxins, such as DDT or atrazine. In some areas of the country, tests for radiological contaminants may be needed.

Chemical Properties

The following parameters are of importance to the poultry industry.

- The measure of pH in water determines its acidic or alkaline quality on a relative scale. (For example, in a solution of hydrochloric acid, the pH may be 3; for sodium hydroxide, it may be 12.) In water, on a scale from 0 to 14, a pH measure of 7 is neutral; for drinking water for humans and animals, the desirable measure of pH is 6.5 to 8.

- The total alkalinity of water is a measure of its capacity to neutralize acidity, which is usually expressed in milligrams per liter of calcium carbonate (mg/L of $CaCO_3$). Natural waters may have less than 50 or as many as 500 mg/L of $CaCO_3$. These variations may be affected by the rocks and soils that the water passes through. The alkalinity varies with pH and hardness, but sudden fluctuations may indicate a contaminant.

- Water also contains total dissolved solids (TDS) and minerals. TDS represent the soluble mineral or salt content of water, especially calcium, magnesium, sodium, chloride, sulfate, bicarbonate, and silica. These substances, if excessive, will affect machinery and industrial processes (by clogging pipes for example, or corroding switches), and their presence in water is frequently associated with discharge from industrial operations.

TDS also affect the germination and growth of plants and the palatability of drinking water, though some minerals are desirable for their beneficial properties. Drinking water should not have more than 500 mg/L of TDS while irrigation waters may have up to 1,500 mg/L of soluble minerals.

Hard waters contain so much calcium and magnesium that it is difficult to make soaps lather. When heated, hard water forms the scale or deposits that we see on cooking utensils and water pipes. Water softening solves the hard water problem but may increase the amount of sodium in the water — a possible danger to people on low sodium diets. Sodium in drinking water should be limited to about 20 mg/L.

Total iron (suspended and dissolved) causes problems in water if it exceeds 0.3 mg/L. High iron levels impart a reddish brown color to water or a bad taste to cooked foods and may restrict growth in turkeys.

Chlorides in water should not exceed 250 mg/L; otherwise, the water may have a salty taste. Excessive chloride levels may also indicate pollution from sewage or other sources.

Sulfates, which should not exceed 250 mg/L, are caused by the leaching of natural deposits of magnesium sulfate (Epsom salts) or sodium sulfate (Glauber's salt). These salts are undesirable because of their laxative effects.

Nitrates (NO_3-) and nitrites (NO_2-) pose health problems to animals and humans, including poultry. Their presence in surface or groundwater in large amounts may indicate septic tank failures, overfertilized fields, or other problems. Nitrate nitrogen levels in drinking water should not exceed 10 mg/L; and nitrites, which convert to nitrates, should not exceed 1 mg/L.

- Chlorine gas and other chlorine compounds are powerful disinfectants and oxidizing agents. Chlorine should be limited in drinking water to no more than 0.05 mg/L; however, there must be a small chlorine residual in public drinking water systems to assure that the water is disinfected.

- Dissolved oxygen (DO), which is vital for aquatic life, can be a key test for water pollution. At DO levels below 3 mg/L, fish may become stressed or die. Generally, in unimpaired waters, dissolved oxygen ranges from 7 to 14 mg/L. However, DO levels approaching 14 mg/L on sunny days may indicate high density algae growth and possible nutrient enrichment (pollution).

Usually, among these parameters, only pH, total iron, DO, and nitrates/nitrites have reference to poultry. Nevertheless, careful and complete monitoring of private water supplies and wells is a must because they provide drinking water for home and poultry operations. When the chemical properties of water exceed acceptable limits for intended uses, water quality is impaired.

Biological Properties

Private water supplies should also be tested once or twice a year for any sign of coliform bacteria. The test for fecal coliform bacteria can differentiate between the bacteria found in soils and plants and the bacteria found in warm-blooded animals. Common symptoms of coliform bacteria in humans are intestinal bloating and diarrhea.

Other bacteriological tests can identify many kinds and numbers of bacteria in water, but they do not separate harmful and harmless bacteria. Tests for Fecal Streptococci, Shigella, Salmonella, Staphylococci, and other bacteria may be necessary under certain circumstances. These tests are specific, time-consuming, and expensive. They isolate bacteria that cause typhoid fever, eye and ear infections, dysentery, boils, or other skin diseases. There are also tests for viruses, protozoa, and parasites.

In surface waters, aquatic vegetation and microscopic animal and plant life may be stimulated or retarded by various water quality factors — pH, nutrients (nitrogen and phosphorus), and turbidity, among others. But growth and decay cycles may have side effects that adversely affect water quality. Even helpful substances can become harmful in overabundance; for example, organic nitrogen in animal wastes and soils can cause "nutrient loading," which results in low DO levels and eutrophication (i.e., an overly productive waterbody.)

Physical Properties

Physical characteristics of water include turbidity, color, taste, odor, and temperature. The presence of foam is an indicator of dissolved organic substances, perhaps raw sewage. Suspended particles may cloud the water, and dissolved substances may alter its odor or taste. Turbidity or cloudy water may indicate the presence of suspended sediments, which reduce light penetration. Color affects quality and can be aesthetically displeasing. Taste and odors can result from dissolved metals, gases, organic materials, or chemicals.

Radiological Properties

Some radioactivity in water, food, and air is natural. However, if higher levels than usual are suspected, the appropriate state agencies should be notified.

Summary

Without efficient management of poultry waste and dead birds, poultry operations could become a source of excess nutrients, disease-caus-

ing bacteria or viruses, and dissolved substances in our nation's surface and groundwater supplies. Proper waste management will enhance the quality of water for everyone.

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Poultry Production and Water Quality

Every year, environmental issues seem to gain emphasis nationally and internationally as the importance of a cleaner environment and respect for pollution prevention practices receive increasing public support. The matter is most pressing to livestock and poultry producers because as environmental sophistication grows so does the focus on nonpoint source pollution. What is more, this deeper environmental sensitivity has occurred simultaneously with an extraordinary increase in the size of the poultry industry and its concentration in certain regions near processing and packing plants. The potential for adverse environmental impact appears greater as a result of the industry's trend to grow ever larger numbers of birds on smaller areas of land.

Understanding Animal Wastes and the Environment

Good waste management practices are essential for preventing the transport of sediments, nutrients, and bacteria into groundwater, rivers, and streams — that is, to prevent pollution — and to protect agricultural resources. The latter aspect of waste management ensures that growers will get the best return on their investments since animal waste is also a valuable resource, a collection of by-products that can be reclaimed for other uses.

The term "poultry waste" generally refers to manure: the feces and uric acid excreted by the growing birds; "litter," on the other hand, refers to manure and used bedding materials. Other wastes associated with poultry production include washwater, storm (and muddy) water runoff, and the carcasses of dead birds and spent hens. Processing wastes include other rendering and lagoon residuals.

These same materials, however, contain (1) valuable nutrients that can reduce the need for commercial fertilizers and increase plant yield; and (2) organic matter that can improve soil quality and extend its ability to hold water. Little wonder, then, that what happens to these by-products can be good or bad for the industry and for the environment.

On the one hand, poultry wastes can do a lot of good. They can be used as fertilizer, soil enhancers, cattle feed, or energy. Poultry producers can add value to these products — and prevent them from contaminating surface and groundwater — by using proven, acceptable methods of collection, storage and handling, treatment, disposal, and management. All such beneficial uses depend on proper management. Without such management, the value of the waste will decline rapidly, even as its potential for adversely affecting the environment and water quality steadily rises.

Pollution Is Not Inevitable

Poultry growers, whether their operation is consolidated or diversified need not produce any pollution outside the system. Pollution occurs only when litter is mismanaged — for example, when it is land applied in quantities that exceed plant needs, or when the ground is wet or frozen. As a result of such applications, potentially contaminating substances become "available" to the environment. If they also become "detached" from the site, for example, by being adsorbed to sediments or dissolved in water, they can be "transported" off site. Transport occurs when contaminants in the animal waste (the unused nutrients, bacteria or other elements in the litter) are released to surface drainage or infiltrate beneath the soil surface in groundwater recharge areas.

To control and prevent pollution, poultry growers need to understand how the value of such by-products can be enhanced and maintained. The value in poultry by-products and their potential to cause either point or nonpoint source pollution have the same origin. That is, the waste and dead birds contain nutrients and salts, suspended materials, the various products of biological reactions, and microorganisms. These elements can be beneficial to the grower, other farmers, the environment, or they can be harmful.

Nutrients and Salts

Poultry manure is a valuable nutrient for grain and fiber crops, forage crops, fruits, and vegetables. However, if manure, litter, dead birds (as compost or as buried carcasses), and/or wastewater are not properly protected and utilized, water contamination can occur from the release of excess nitrogen and phosphorus into the environment.

Nitrogen is an essential plant nutrient but, in excess, it can be harmful. High concentrations of nitrate in drinking water can affect human health, especially in infants and children. Ammonia in small quantities is toxic to fish and aquatic organisms; and high concentrations of nitrate in drinking water can also have significant effects on young chickens.

When nitrogen and phosphorus concentrations in waterbodies rise too high, algae and rooted aquatic plants take over, prematurely aging and choking the waterbody and creating undesirable conditions — odors, offensive taste, and discoloration — all of which can make the water unfit for consumption or recreational and aesthetic use. Further, these eutrophic conditions can kill fish, clog water treatment plant filters, and lead to the growth of blue-green algae, a species that can be fatal to livestock.

Because nitrate-nitrogen is highly mobile, it can leach into groundwater and flow with stormwater runoff into surface waters. If too much poultry manure and litter are used as fertilizer, nitrogen and phosphorus concentrations in nearby waters are likely to be high. Soil erosion also increases the amount of phosphorus in surface waters. Excessive phosphorus in soil, above 800 mg/L, may become soluble and move into groundwater. Phosphorus concentrations may vary, depending on the type of soil and its organic content.

Calcium and sodium salts are added to poultry feeds to help the birds maintain chemical balance and nutrition. Excess salts pass through the animals and are eliminated in manure. Sometimes, when the waste accumulates, the salts leach into groundwater and enter surface water through unprotected runoff. There they alter the water's taste or harm freshwater plants and animals.

Suspended Materials

When suspended matter from poultry wastes reach surface water, the waterbody not only looks unattractive — the quality of the water invariably suffers. The suspended material reduces the penetration of sunlight and therefore slows the production of oxygen. The result is an oxygen demand that reduces the levels of dissolved oxygen in the water. It also clogs fish gills, makes it difficult for sight-feeding fish to find food, and settles over fish spawning areas.

Products of Biological Reactions

In a natural environment, the breakdown of organic matter, such as poultry waste, is a function of complex, interrelated, and mixed biological populations. All substances of animal or vegetable origin contain carbon and are, therefore, organic. Organic matter is converted to simple compounds by naturally occurring microorganisms. These simple compounds may be other forms of organic matter or they may be nonorganic compounds or gases, such as nitrates, orthophosphates, ammonia, and hydrogen sulfide. A biological reaction occurs when manure or other organic matter is added to water and anaerobic or aerobic organisms begin the decaying process. Aerobic bacteria (oxygen requiring organisms) consume free oxygen and produce carbon dioxide gas. Under anaerobic conditions (without oxygen), methane, amines, and sulfides are produced.

Microorganisms

Desirable and undesirable microorganisms live in our environment. Animal waste is a potential source of some 150 disease-causing organisms or pathogens. These organisms include bacteria, viruses, fungi, protozoa, and parasites. Exam-

ples of undesirable microorganisms include Salmonella, Cryptosporidium, Giradia, Listeria, coliform, New Castle (virus), ringworm, coccidiosis, and Ascaris.

When found in water or wastes, these pathogens pose significant threats to humans and other animals. They can infect humans and animals through drinking water, contact with the skin, or consumption of fish or other aquatic animals. Most pathogens die relatively quickly. However, under the right conditions, they may live long enough to cause problems. They may persist longer in groundwater than in surface water.

Producers can prevent poultry by-products or waste from contaminating water. However, environmental needs and solutions are site specific and regional in nature. In some cases, state regulations and permitting requirements may be more stringent than federal regulations. Therefore, local sources of information, including industry associations, state departments of environmental protection and public health, and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and Cooperative State Research, Extension, and Education Service offices should be consulted about poultry waste or by-products that affect water quality.

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Understanding Water Quality Regulations

As the poultry industry grows, so does concern for water quality, conservation, and environmental management. Growers have individual and civic reasons for caring: they are responsible with other human beings for the earth's environment, and they realize that they, their families and neighbors, and those who live in connecting watersheds, distant cities, even other countries — ultimately breathe the same air and drink the same water.

Pollution is intolerable whether it occurs on privately owned land and water, or travels many miles downstream or over mountains to other destinations. The arithmetic is simple: good environmental stewardship reduces the cost of water pollution, saves natural resources, and makes good neighbors.

Federal and State Statutes

Federal water quality laws and regulations administered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (i.e., Clean Water Act, Safe Drinking Water Act, National Pollution Discharge Elimination System [NPDES] Permits) and the laws of each state make it illegal to discharge wastes of any kind to waters of the United States. That is, poultry waste cannot be collected, stored, or applied anywhere or in any manner that would likely result in water pollution.

In rare instances, the effect of combined federal and state regulations appears to create double jeopardy. Such situations (though they can be misused by the media or exploited to create controversy) can usually be swiftly resolved; however, compliance with environmental regulations requires careful planning and management. A rule of thumb is simply to assess one's whole operation from time to time (e.g., Farm*A*Syst assessments are self-administered, voluntary, and confidential) to ensure that no conditions arise on the farm that would put the grower at risk of violating water quality laws.

Because regulations differ and each state has its own enforcement procedures, poultry growers are well-advised to check with state and local agencies before production begins or systems change. Often the state's requirements are more stringent than federal requirements; however, growers in coastal zones may be subject to additional federal statutes as a result of the Coastal Zone Act Reauthorization Amendments of 1990. Industry organizations, agricultural research institutions, private and government agencies can help growers know, understand, and comply with the regulations in their area.

Point and Nonpoint Source Pollution

For management purposes, water pollution sources are divided into two groups or types. *Point source* pollution comes from a discrete man-made conveyance, such as a pipe, lagoon, ditch, or storage tank. *Nonpoint sources* of pollution are dispersed, harder to pinpoint, and cumulative. They include land uses or human activities that are potentially significant because they are common and widespread. Agriculture, mining, forestry, highway and other construction, septic tank, fieldline, and other waste disposal systems, and urban runoff are examples of potential nonpoint source pollution.

Some activities are regulated as point and nonpoint sources of pollution. For example, industrial or municipal utilities may operate treatment plants, which are point sources of pollution, but they may also be responsible to prevent further contamination from, or of

stormwater runoff, a nonpoint source of water pollution. Similarly, some livestock facilities may be regulated as point sources when they are collecting, storing or conveying facility wastewater and runoff; but once the manure or litter has been applied to the land, it is managed as a nonpoint source. Poultry growers must know how to manage point and nonpoint sources.

General Guidelines

Since the Clean Water Act was passed in 1972, concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), including some large poultry houses, have been regulated as point sources of pollution. Federal law which the states administer through the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) program forbids point source discharges, that is, the discharge of any pollutant or contaminant to "waters of the United States."

Thus, CAFOs, like other point sources, must obtain an operating permit which prohibits discharge except from lagoons during storm events greater than 24-hour, 25-year storms. The permit also specifies best management practices to protect surface water, including diverting off-site drainage around the facilities and designing appropriate storage facilities for manure and process-generated wastewater. Adequate runoff storage must be included in the design; lagoons or holding ponds must be sized to withstand a 25-year, 24-hour duration storm.

Nonpoint Source Prevention Practices

The extent of nonpoint sources has been more fully realized in the last decade, but they are usually assessed locally on a stream-by-stream basis and controlled by conservation or "best management practices" (BMPs). BMPs are routine activities that can be incorporated in animal and crop farming to conserve natural resources and protect air, soil, and water quality. They are structures or activities that reduce the potentially harmful effects of agricultural production.

State and local Guidelines

Most states now require (1) permits for the operation and construction of confined animal facilities whether current or planned, if the facility uses a liquid waste management system; and (2) that all livestock farmers plan their waste management and disposal system, especially as it concerns land applications. Whether these plans are written, kept on file, or simply in evidence on site, may depend on other circumstances.

The conditions pertaining to permits are not uniform across the states, but they usually provide specific guidance for operations at, under, or exceeding a certain size; establish setback distances for grower houses, lagoons, and waste management structures (to protect water and air quality and to limit any nuisances that might impinge on nearby homes or public buildings, such as schools and churches); buffer zones; and design specifications for new construction.

Land application requirements generally establish when and where applications can be permitted; for example, only at approved rates, and with nutrient management planning; not on frozen ground or when rain is expected on slopes greater than 15 percent, or on setbacks from public buildings and property lines. Typical setback distances for land applications are 100 feet from streams or ponds, sinkholes, wells, and water supplies, and 50 feet from any water lines or known agricultural drains.

Getting Help

A system of standard operating procedures or practices developed in accord with, or as part of, a "resource management plan, or "animal waste management system" recommended by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), will generally meet state and local requirements. The NRCS offers technical assistance to growers and often works with local soil and water conservation districts and state and local agencies to help farmers write suitable plans.

Such guidance augments the grower's own engineering and technical resources and makes it easier to adapt national conservation practices to regional conditions. It may also be possible that growers are eligible for cost-sharing. The USDA has used cost-share programs to encourage conservation over many years. Similar programs may now exist or are being developed.

The NRCS guidelines can be found in the Agricultural Waste Management Field Handbook (AWMFH) or Field Office Technical Guides (FOTG) which are reviewed and supplemented as needed. Supplements to the National Handbook and specifications prepared by the states are reviewed in NRCS field offices to ensure the consistency of new and emerging technologies and rules. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Cooperative Extension Service have also prepared guidance documents applying conservation practices.

Changing Attitudes

In the United States, regulations to control nonpoint source pollution are not the only driving force behind changing attitudes. Voluntary programs, public education, and financial incentives are more in tune with traditional values. Growers want to protect the environment, increase their efficiency, and enjoy a good public image.

Animal waste management practices can increase their return on investment and protect natural resources, especially if one's objectives are as clear as this simple waste management formula:

- prevent the generation of wastes where possible;
- recycle wastes that cannot be prevented;
- pretreat wastes to eliminate possible contaminants; and
- dispose of unusable wastes properly as a last resort.

Management commitment and awareness, scientific research and common sense, and in some cases, new installations and equipment are needed to protect the availability and quantity of our natural resources. The scope of the problem is global, national, and industrywide; cooperation among agencies, associations, and individuals speeds the development of technology and its transfer, and creates a participatory environment that encourages the search for solutions and fosters attitude changes.

Compliance Issues

Water quality legislation has teeth. Section 309 of the Clean Water Act establishes criminal penalties for failure to comply with the regulations. The threat of prosecution can be a first step in forcing compliance; the charges can range from minor infringements or negligent actions (lightly punished) to more serious charges of conscious violations and knowing endangerment. Knowing and willful endangerment and outright falsification are the most serious charges.

In short, point source wastewaters that leave a poultry house or plant must comply with the national effluent levels. A pretreatment program may be necessary. Some poultry operations have discovered that running their own pretreatment plants, though expensive, can be more efficient than other methods of compliance.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency now uses audits to determine how and why publicly owned treatment works are not in compliance. Recent regulations (in 40 C.F.R. Part 403) concern pretreatment:

- Pollutants that would interfere with the operation of the publicly owned treatment works or cause fire or explosive hazards are not permitted.
- No pH levels lower than 5.0 are allowed.
- Solid or viscous pollutants are monitored.
- High levels of biological oxygen demanding substances (BOD) are regulated as are oils, grease, and toxic gases.

The poultry industry should, therefore, take an active part in pretreatment programs.

Federal regulations are administered in most cases by the states, whose regulations and permitting requirements vary and may be more stringent than national regulations. Please consult local sources of information, including industry associations, state departments of environmental protection and public health, and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and Cooperative State Research, Extension, and Education Service offices, to ensure that your waste management activities comply with all regulations and ordinances.

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Drinking Water Quality — Protecting Your Birds' Health and Performance

Drinking water for poultry and other animals, ourselves included, is an important dietary requirement — and an easy one to take for granted. Under normal conditions, poultry will consume twice as much water as food — two pounds of water (about a quart) for each pound of food, though this amount will vary seasonally and with the bird's age.

Water is not only a nutrient; it also softens food and carries it through the body, helps digestion and absorption, and cools the body as it evaporates through the bird's lungs and air sacs. Water helps animals remove waste, lubricates their joints, and helps maintain body temperatures. Further, water is used to deliver vitamins and vaccines (though vitamin dietary supplements are probably only needed during stress conditions). Water is a major component in blood and a necessary medium for many chemical reactions that help form meat and eggs.

Poor water quality, on the other hand, can retard growth, curtail egg production, or produce lower egg quality, even before it is readily apparent. In many cases, however, growers merely assume the security and quality of their water supply. This assumption, though it obviously fits our traditional experience, leaves the water untested until or unless it adversely affects the flock's health and performance.

Growers who carefully monitor feed consumption, egg production, temperature, ventilation, light intensity, and mortality as factors related to optimal production should pay similar attention to water quality and to how much water their birds actually consume. It is important to have the water tested from time to time.

Water varies greatly in its quality and potential for contamination — even from wells in the same county — and the quality can be altered by extremes in its content, such as pH, bacteria, hardness and varying amounts of naturally occurring elements. Some pollutants may have little effect on the birds. It is always possible, however, that factors that do not affect the birds in one environment — for example, poultry are relatively tolerant to nitrate — will in another. Thus, nitrate has been known to affect the birds' performance when it is present in water along with other contaminants such as bacteria. In such cases, when the proper treatment of water is begun, or changes are made in the source of the birds' drinking water, their health and performance quickly returns to its normal levels.

Similar single or aggregated effects have been discovered in the birds' reactions to other naturally occurring elements. Thus, feed conversion, for example, has been positively correlated to the presence of sulfate and copper concentrations in the water, and livability with potassium, chloride, and calcium. Body weight is positively influenced by drinking water hardness and dissolved oxygen, and negatively influenced by total bacteria and pH less than or equal to 6.0. Acidity (which is corrosive in piping) is usually maintained at normal levels in drinking water supplies, but some growers acidify water to help prevent bacteria.

Drinking water standards have been established for human consumption, but not for birds. It is safe to say, however, that a consistent source of high quality water is essential for the optimum performance that today's market conditions require. The following table can be used to determine poultry drinking water quality.

Table 1.—Drinking Water Quality Standards for Poultry.

CONTAMINANTS	AVERAGE LEVELS	MAXIMUM ACCEPTABLE	REMARKS
BACTERIA			
Total bacteria	0/mL	100/mL	0/mL is desirable
Coliform bacteria	0/mL	50/mL	0/mL is desirable
ACIDITY/HARDNESS			
pH	6.8–7.5	6.8–8.0	< 6.0 is undesirable; < 6.3 may degrade performance.
Total Hardness	60–180 ppm	110 ppm	< 60 is unusually soft; > 180 is very hard.
NITROGEN COMPOUNDS			
Nitrate (NO_3)	10 mg/L (NO_3–N)	25 mg/L	Levels of nitrate from 3 to 20 mg/L may affect performance.
Nitrite (NO_2)	0.4 mg/L (NO_2–N)	4 mg/L	—
NATURAL CHEMICALS			
Calcium (Ca)	60 mg/L	—	—
Chloride (Cl)	14 mg/L	250 mg/L	Even 14 mg/L may be detrimental if sodium level is higher than 50 mg/L.
Copper (Cu)	0.002 mg/L	0.6 mg/L	Higher levels of copper produce bitter flavor.
Iron (Fe)	0.2 mg/L	0.3 mg/L	Higher levels of iron produce bad odor and taste.
Lead (Pb)	—	0.02 mg/L	Higher levels of lead are toxic.
Magnesium (Mg)	14 mg/L	125 mg/L	Higher levels of magnesium have laxative effect. Levels > 50 mg/L may affect performance if sulfate level is high.
Sodium (Na)	32 mg/L	50 mg/L	> 50 mg/L of sodium may affect performance if sulfate or chloride is high.
Sulfate (SO_4)	32 mg/L	250 mg/L	Higher levels of sulfate have laxative effect. Levels >50 mg/L may affect performance if magnesium and chloride are high.
Zinc (Zn)	—	1.5 mg/L	Higher levels of zinc are toxic.

Source: Adapted from Carter and Sneed, 1987.

Observe the Birds' Drinking Habits

Water temperature and taste are important components of water quality. They make the water appealing (thereby ensuring that animals will not neglect to drink in sufficient amounts); and they also indicate other problems: the presence of contaminants (e.g., disease-causing organisms or toxic metals); an acidic imbalance, or too much sodium. While several elements can cause poor water quality, the interaction between elements is, as previously noted, more significant in water quality problems than the simple fact of their presence.

Thus, producers should be concerned if their birds' drinking water contains any of the following elements:

- high concentrations of bacteria, particularly coliforms;
- dissolved solids — organic, inorganic, or toxic elements;
- turbidity (i.e., the presence of material in suspension rather than in solution in the water); and
- unpleasant physical characteristics, such as bitter, hard, odiferous, cloudy (or tinted) conditions.

The presence of any of these characteristics is sufficient to warrant investigation and perhaps an improvement or change in the water supply to protect the flock's health, longevity, and production. The following elements, however, should be of particular concern:

- the presence of nutrients, especially nitrate and nitrite;
- high concentrations of sodium, chloride, and hydrogen sulfide (sulfur water);
- excess levels of iron and manganese;
- toxic elements, such as lead, selenium and arsenic;
- microbial contamination; and
- industrial chemicals or toxins.

Nevertheless, the most telling effects of poor water quality are generally caused by the presence of bacteria or minerals. Thus, high concentrations of bacteria or toxic elements in the water affect the normal physiological processes of the animal, resulting in inferior performance. High concentrations of minerals may have less effect on the animals unless or until they clog the water system, depriving the animals of water.

Qualities to look for include turbidity, taste, odor and color. Turbidity results from materials in suspension, for example, silt; clay, algae or organic matter. Turbid waters are unpalatable, and they clog the delivery system. Water should not taste bitter, sweet, salty, or sour, since such impressions are usually the effect of salts. Bitter tasting water may be contaminated by iron and manganese sulfates. Iron gives the water a reddish or brownish color; copper tends to turn the water bluish. On the other hand, the water may be clear without being safe. The presence of total dissolved solids is not visible in "clear" water.

Sulfur water smells too much like rotten eggs arising from the presence of hydrogen sulfide; hydrogen sulfide and iron will create the condition known as "black water." Since hydrogen sulfide is caused by bacteria, chlorination can help solve the problem. Sulfate is a laxative and therefore a cause of wet litter in poultry houses. Sulfate generally does not cause a similar odor in water.

Practice Good Maintenance and Sample the Water Supply

Baby chicks are 85 percent water, adults are 55 to 60 percent water and eggs are 66 percent water. Even a 10 percent loss of water can cause serious physiological disorders and a 20 percent loss can lead to death. Thus, maintaining a quality drinking water supply in each poultry house is important, and checking the drinkers for proper functioning should be a normal part of an operator's daily routine. In fact, water cleanliness techniques should evolve each time an equipment line is upgraded.

Bell-type drinkers, for example, can have a high level of bacteria, but growers can use chlorination to solve this problem provided that they discontinue chlorination in cases of heat stress. And, because chlorine also kills viruses, and vaccines, powdered milk should be run through the system ahead of vaccines. Discontinue water treatment 72 hours before water vaccination.

Some growers are using intermittent watering programs to help save water and improve the litter (by keeping it drier). This procedure provides plenty of water but prevents overconsumption and spillage. It is not generally recommended in summer or with nipple and cup waterers. The attempt to conserve water and litter by cutting back on the amount of water in the waterers, while yet allowing the birds to drink at any time is not as safe as the intermittent watering regime.

To test your water: collect samples either at the well source or at the point of entry into the house, use a clean quart plastic bottle and transport the sample to a diagnostic lab. To test the bacterial levels of the water, flame the faucet with a propane torch, then run a small amount of water to cool the faucet. Collect the sample in a sterile container, and if possible avoid taking the sample in the broiler house in which birds are present.

Consider the Experience of Other Producers

Several demonstration projects have been done to assess the effects of poor water quality on poultry production. While the data are not conclusive, they do show the correlation between poor water quality and inferior production.

A field study conducted in Canada sampled the water supply of 33 farms (involving layer, broiler, and turkey farms). The producers were surveyed regarding any health or other problems they may have experienced in the month prior to the sampling. The parameters tested included carbonates, bicarbonates, pH, chloride, fluoride, nitrate, nitrite, sulfate, magnesium, calcium, sodium, potassium, and phosphate. The analysis revealed several instances in which the producer's problems directly correlated with water quality impairments.

On an egg producing farm, for example, the producer reported a high incidence of diarrhea among the flock and severe problems with the egg shells. About 15 percent of the eggs had pin-sized holes in their shells. The water quality on this farm had higher levels of carbonates, bicarbonates, sodium, chloride, and pH than any other farm participating in the survey.

Research by R.E. Waggoner profiled in a January 1987 issue of *Poultry Digest* has also shown that changes in water quality can affect the birds' performance. A demonstration conducted at two similar broiler houses — one performing well, the other not performing well — successfully linked the different outcomes to differences in the water supply. When the water supply was tested, the water quality was "good" at house number 1 (as was its performance); but the water at house number 2 (with unsatisfactory performance) had high concentrations of sodium and bacterial contamination.

On the same farm, another two broiler houses were connected to different water sources. One was fed from an old well, the other from a well that had only recently been drilled. When birds raised in the house connected to the new well did not thrive as expected, this house was reconnected to the old well, and its performance improved. Thereafter, high concentrations of sodium and sulfate were found in the drilled well.

Simple water sanitation procedures can protect poultry's drinking water from contamination. Producers have different opinions about which cleaning technique is most effective, but no one disputes its necessity. Some producers use cleaning agents to remove scale and slime, to tie up minerals in the water, and flush medications from the lines. These measures are followed by sanitizers to kill bacteria and algae.

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Environmental Impacts of Poultry Waste

Poultry raised for commercial purposes produce large amounts of manure which — unlike the manure of free range or pastured animals — is a collectible resource. It contains valuable plant nutrients and other chemicals that, if properly managed, can be returned to the land or processed for other uses. Therefore, anyone planning to undertake a confined animal feeding operation must give serious attention to the proper handling of manure and other waste products.

Factors influencing the choice of animal waste management systems begin with the type and size of the operation being contemplated, the grower's management skills and inclinations, the local environment, federal and state laws and regulations, and the effect of the proposed waste management plan on the operation's economic forecast. The importance of the choice increases in proportion to the volume and potential value of the residual materials.

For Voluntary Action

The National Farm Assessment Program (Farm*A*Syst) expanded from a 1991 pilot project in Wisconsin and Minnesota. It is funded by the USDA Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

A Farm*A*Syst checklist provides a simple way to identify (1) where a grower's management actions and environmental concerns intersect; (2) the degree to which current practices may be putting these vulnerable points at risk; and (3) strategic actions one can take to correct problems and reduce risk. The checklist, or self-assessment, is comprehensive but not lengthy; and it is completely private. Other Farm*A*Syst program materials explain practical management strategies and environmental regulations and how to find technical resources and financial help. Consult with local Cooperative State Research, Extension, and Education and NRCS offices for more information, access to the program, and technical support.

Concern for soil and water quality is the key to selecting a successful waste management plan, but criteria to be considered include the size of the operation, the economic consequences involved, and the growers' (and company's) personal management styles. The complexity of the system, whether it is dry or liquid, and the best management practices that can be used to minimize its effects on the environment are the subject of subsequent fact sheets in this series.

Begin with the Land/Water Interface

Whether the wastes or by-products that accompany poultry growouts are good or bad for the environment depends in large part on interactions between the activities of the producers and the ecosystem. Hence, planning efforts begin with an assessment of the farmstead's location in relation to rivers, lakes, ponds, ditches and sinkholes; the chemical and physical properties of the soil profile; the availability of agricultural land in the production area; and the possible effects of poultry production on the naturally occurring cycles of nitrogen and phosphorus.

Why Begin with Water

Agricultural activities, including — in some areas — mishandled or excessive poultry wastes, are a major source of nonpoint source pollu-

tion, although agriculture and forestry management are not the only sources. Crop production, pastures, rangeland, feedlots and other animal holding areas are agricultural sources of the U.S. waters assessed, 50 to 60 percent of the water quality problems in rivers and lakes and 34 percent of the waters in more urbanized coastal areas are impaired from agricultural sources. Bacteria, sedimentation, and nutrients are the leading pollutants.

Properly managing manure, controlling runoff, and nutrient management planning in conjunction with land applications will reduce or eliminate much of the proposed source of pollution and contribute to more productive farming. Most nonpoint source pollution problems can be controlled if growers know how nutrients and soil interact and plan accordingly.

Nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium move through cycles on a farm. As nutrients, they go from crops to animals (in feed) to the soil (waste applications) and back again to other crops. If the cycle holds, everything works as it should. But too many nutrients already in the soil or too much waste applied to the land can move with the soil into surface water or through the soil into groundwater until their presence in the water reaches unacceptable levels, that is, is sufficient to impair water quality.

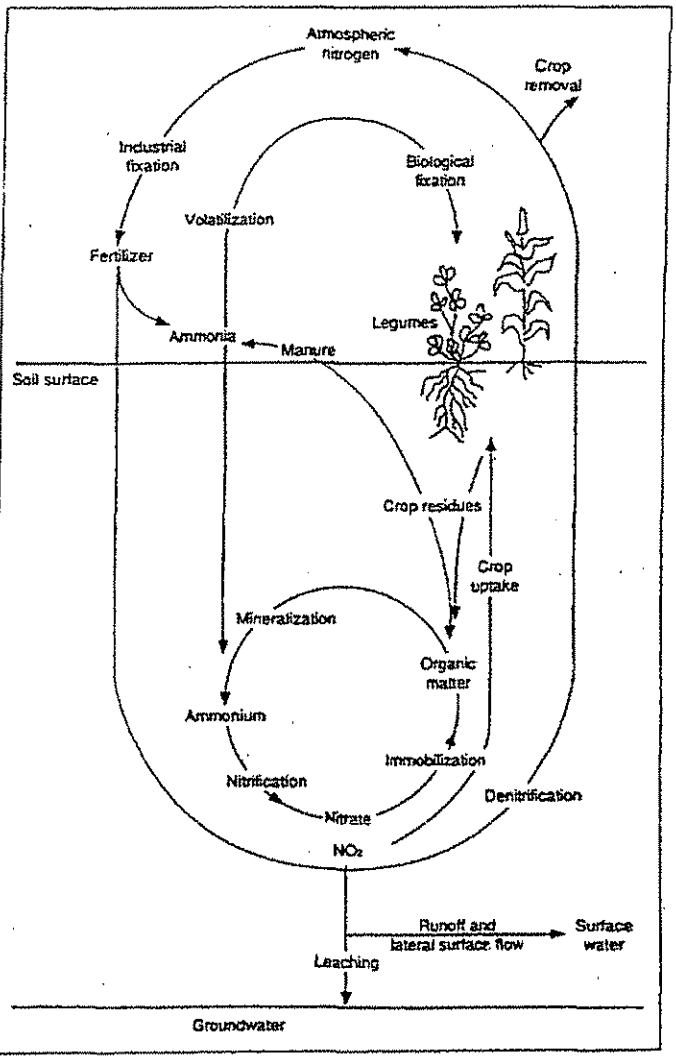

Figure 1.—The nitrogen cycle. Source: Pennsylvania State University, College of Agriculture. 1989. Groundwater and Agriculture in Pennsylvania. Circular 341. Reprinted with permission.

Nitrogen

Of the three major nutrients in poultry waste, nitrogen is the most complex and hence the most likely to contribute to environmental problems. Most of earth's nitrogen exists as nitrogen gas in the atmosphere (see Fig. 1). It can be transformed into inorganic forms by lightning or into organic forms by plants, such as soybeans, alfalfa, or clovers. Nitrogen can also be transformed into inorganic forms (commercial fertilizers) by energy intensive processes.

Most of the nitrogen found in animal wastes is organic nitrogen. A smaller amount of the nitrogen in litter is ammonium. Organic nitrogen can be mineralized or converted by soil bacteria into inorganic nitrogen, the form in which nitrogen is available to plants. Excessive organic and ammonium forms of nitrogen will be transformed in soil into nitrate nitrogen (that is, into water soluble nitrogen).

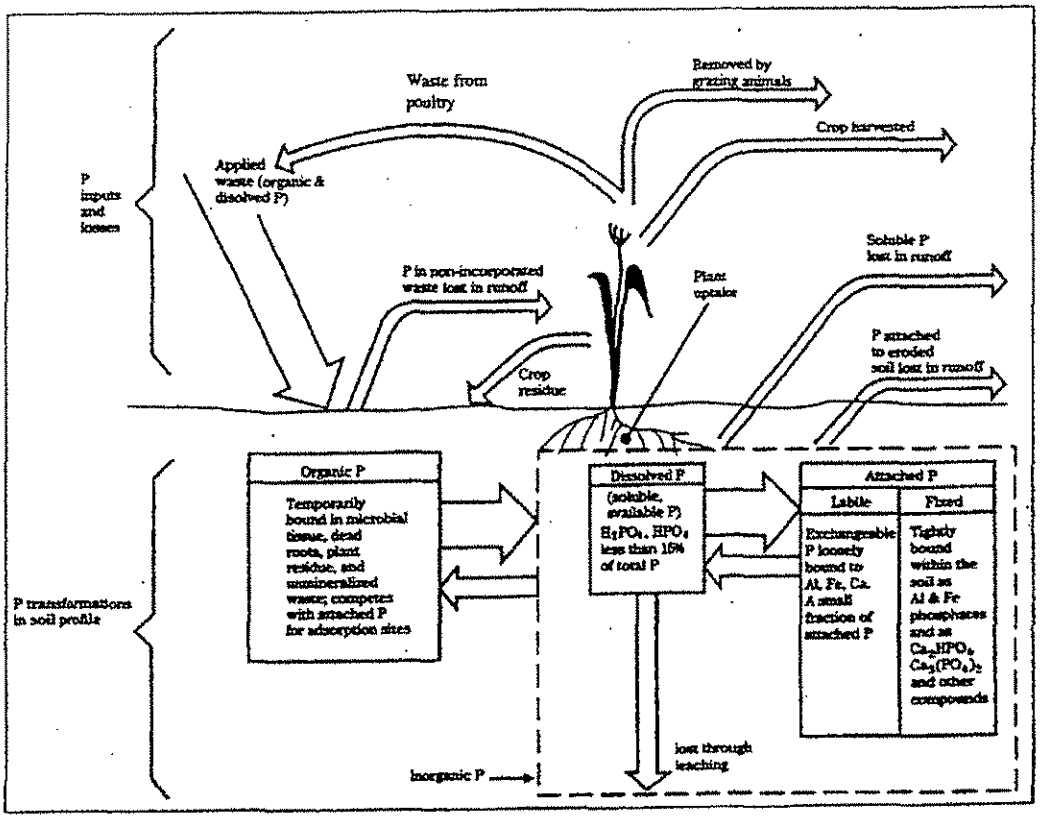

Figure 2.—Abbreviated phosphorus cycle.

Losses of nitrogen regardless of source (e.g., manure, commercial fertilizer, or municipal biosolids) from the cropping system can occur as a result of volatilization, surface runoff, and leaching. Surface runoff can move dissolved nitrogen (especially nitrate), ammonium nitrogen attached to eroding soil particles, and organic nitrogen contained in organic or plant residues into streams and lakes. Nitrates also move with the soil or leach through well-drained soils past the root zone into the groundwater supply.

High levels of nitrate can be toxic to human health, especially newborns. Nitrates reduce the blood's capacity to carry oxygen or cause internal suffocation. Scientists tell us that too much nitrate can affect the weight, feed conversion, and performance of poultry. Too much nitrogen in surface water makes the water less productive and may result in fish kills.

Phosphorus

Poultry wastes also contain significant amounts of phosphorus (see Fig. 2). Phosphorus, like nitrogen, is essential for plant and animal growth and also contributes to environmental problems. In fact, it seems to be the limiting factor in the huge algae blooms that make lakes unfit for swimming and ultimately deplete their oxygen supply, deadening the water and killing fish. Phosphorus has become a major cause of water quality degradation.

Phosphorus exists in either dissolved or solid form. Dissolved phosphorus usually exists as orthophosphates, inorganic polyphosphates, and organic phosphorus in the soil. Phosphorus in the solid form is referred to as particulate phosphorus and may be composed of many chemical forms. Particulate phosphorus comes in four classifications:

- adsorbed phosphorus, which attaches to soil particles;